



NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Leader of Criminal Enterprise Convicted for Distributing Methamphetamine in the Red River Valley

FARGO - United States Attorney Drew Wrigley announced that **Francisca Avila Vargas, a/k/a Poncha, a/k/a Mama**, of St. Paul and Ada, Minnesota, and **Miguel Garcia, a/k/a Michael Garcia**, of Perley, Minnesota, were found guilty on May 23, 2006, by a 12-person jury in United States District Court for their roles in a large drug-trafficking organization.

Following a week-long trial and 3 1/2 hours of deliberations, a Federal jury found **Avila Vargas**, 45, guilty of conspiracy to distribute controlled substances and operating a continuing criminal enterprise for her role as the leader of an organization out of St. Paul that supplied over 30 pounds of methamphetamine to the McCracken organization in Fargo and other distributors in Ada and Crookston between the years 2002 and 2005. **Avila Vargas** faces a mandatory life sentence for these charges and awaits sentencing. Danny and Kelly McCracken, who testified at the trial of **Avila Vargas**, await sentencing for their roles in this case.

Avila Vargas is the mother of Lee Avila, who was murdered on June 30, 2005, in East Grand Forks, Minnesota. Michael Petzold is the only person indicted for the drug-related murder of Avila. **Avila Vargas** faces an additional drug conspiracy charge in connection with Petzold and other co-defendants. Those cases are currently set for trial in January 2007.

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Co-defendant **Garcia**, 34, who was tried with **Avila Vargas**, was also found guilty for his role as a distributor in the **Avila Vargas** organization. **Garcia**, who has two prior felony drug convictions in Clay County, also faces a mandatory life sentence.

“Large-scale trafficking organizations are responsible for importing 98% of the meth that gets used in North Dakota,” stated U.S. Attorney Drew Wrigley. “These two defendants had the opportunity to cooperate with our widening investigation, but chose to roll the dice. Mandatory life prison sentences await them, and our investigation of this and other organizations presses forward with gathering steam.”

To date, 11 other defendants have been sentenced for their roles in this conspiracy. The sentences have averaged over 10 years in Federal prison. Those defendants and their respective sentences are: Heath Nickel, 132 months; Lester Holbrook, 144 months; Tara Maladecki, 46 months; Ryan Gilbertson, 120 months; Keith Brown, 144 months; Matthew H. Peterson, 18 months; Jerad Egge, 108 months; Javier Reyes, 204 months; Tyler Berglund, 282 months; Michael Zerr, 119 months; and Kristin Hettervig, 59 months.

The case was investigated by a number of agencies, including the Drug Enforcement Administration; Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives; Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension; Fargo, West Fargo, and Moorhead Police Departments, and Cass and Clay County Sheriff’s Offices

The case was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Christopher Myers and Brett Shasky.

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